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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) promotes excellence and equity in education by conducting research and demonstration projects, collecting statistics, disseminating information, and providing technical assistance to those working to improve education. OERI supports two major research and development programs: the 12 National Research and Development Centers and the 10 Regional Educational Laboratories. This digest reviews a sampling of recent reading-related research and development initiatives being conducted by the Labs and Centers. The digest first looks at the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement's (CELA) studies on how the various components of curriculum can work together to support higher literacy levels in elementary and secondary school students. It then examines several research initiatives underway at the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA), including a comparison of the effects of three phonics programs on decoding and the ability to read connected text, and a study of how watching "TV stories" can prepare non-reading preschoolers for later reading comprehension. The digest notes that the North Central Regional Laboratory (NCREL) has a long-term professional development program to improve reading at all grade levels by helping teachers take a strategic approach to reading and teaching. Also discussed are projects at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) and at the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory. (NKA)

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Highlights of Reading Research in the Labs and Centers of the U.S. Department of Education

by Shawna Brynildssen

The mission of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) is to provide "national leadership for educational research and statistics." This mission includes promoting excellence and equity in education by conducting research and demonstration projects, collecting statistics, disseminating information, and providing technical assistance to those working to improve education (http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/about.html).

As part of this effort, OERI supports two major research and development programs: the National Research & Development Centers and the Regional Educational Laboratories. The twelve university-based Centers address specific topics such as early childhood development and learning, student learning and achievement, and cultural and linguistic diversity. The ten Laboratories, serving geographic regions across the country, work to ensure access to the best available information from research and practice for those involved in education improvement. Since improving reading skills in American children is a top priority for the U.S. Department of Education and the nation, this Digest will review a sampling of recent reading-related research and development initiatives being conducted by the Labs and Centers.

CELA: Improving English and Literacy Achievement

The National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA) has recently studied how the various components of curriculum can work together to support higher literacy levels in elementary and secondary school students. The research included exemplary elementary language arts instruction, exemplary instruction in middle and secondary schools, the role of school subjects, home, and community in lifetime literacy, the role of technology in literacy achievement, and teacher education and professional development (http://cela.albany.edu).

Some of CELA's studies reveal the importance of balance in effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These studies suggest that rather than using a single approach, effective programs find a balance in which basic skills and meaningful activity support and enrich one another. Detailed descriptions of these findings are available on the CELA web site.

CELA has published two booklets which synthesize the research and practical classroom strategies that work: *Guidelines for Teaching Middle and High School Students to Read and Write Well* and *Improving Literacy Understanding through Classroom Conversation*. Research embodied in the latter booklet is also reflected in a national public television series entitled *Envisioning Literature*, to begin airing in January 2002 on the Annenberg/CPB channel.

New work underway by CELA will build on previous research and will involve design, implementation, and professional development studies to design programs for schools and districts that are seeking to improve student learning and achievement in English. Currently, CELA is focusing on the *Partnerships for Improving Literacy Learning*. Additional information on this program can be found on the CELA website.

CIERA: Examining Emerging Readers

A number of research initiatives are underway at the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). In a 2001 presentation entitled "A Newcomer's View of Current Research at CIERA," the center's co-director, Joanne Carlisle, offered a synopsis of the most recent studies (Carlisle, 2001). They included:

- A comparison of the effects of three phonics programs on decoding and the ability to read connected text.
- A comparison of 3-4 year olds already reading connected text and non-precocious readers from middle and low-income households.
- A study of the role of informational texts in first grade, and the impact of text diversity on reading comprehension.
- A study of computer programs specifically designed to improve literacy in African American children.
- A four-year study examining the effectiveness of a preschool literacy program for Spanish-speaking children.
- Research on how watching "TV stories" can prepare non-reading preschoolers for later reading comprehension.

The CIERA website (http://www.ciera.org) contains the findings of these studies, as well as information on recent CIERA presentations and a training kit and information on the CIERA School Change Classroom Observation Scheme.

NCREL: Strategic Teaching

One of the signature programs at the North Central Regional Laboratory (NCREL) is a long-term professional development program known as STRP. An acronym for "Strategic Teaching and Reading Project," STRP seeks to improve reading at all grade levels by helping teachers take a strategic approach to reading and teaching. At the core of the STRP curriculum are five comprehension strategies. Mary Foertsch, coordinator of NCREL's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum, describes them in an interview with Kroeger & Blaser (1999) as:

> (a) activating prior knowledge before, during, and after reading; (b) inferencing, which is the use of reasoning skills to formulate conclusions from something that is known or assumed to be true; (c) using metacognitive strategies, which, broadly defined, means taking charge of your own learning and thinking about how you learn; (d) understanding word meaning; and (e) knowing about text structure" (p. 1).

Currently, NCREL is developing an online professional development course based on the STRP principles. The course will provide educators with current research on reading strategy instruction, as well as examples and suggestions.

SEDL: A Cognitive Framework

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) recently completed a four-year Reading Coherence Initiative. The study involved 44 kindergarten, first grade, and second grade teachers in 8 different schools, all of which had significant numbers of struggling readers. Researchers examined the cognitive elements necessary to reading acquisition and how those elements fit together, ultimately forming a framework for early reading. The framework, published under the title *The Cognitive Foundations of Learning to Read*, was designed to help educators better assess individual students' reading progress and implement student-centered, individualized instructional strategies. (SEDL website: http://www.sedl.org/work/historical/rci.html).

Lab at Brown: Best Practices for Literacy Support

At least two literacy-centered initiatives are in progress at the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University.

- *Adolescent Literacy in the Content Areas:* Through researching and collecting best practices, the Lab has developed four key components of the adolescent support network. They include social and emotional motivation; instructional strategies; a cross-curricular approach; and organizational support structures (Lab at Brown, The Knowledge Loom: http://knowledgeloom.org/adlit/index.shtml).
- *Regional Early Literacy Practices:* In four separate studies of high-performing schools in Vermont, Maine, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, researchers have identified explicit practices and characteristics that are not present to the same degree in low-performing schools. The characteristics identified include a belief in the potential of all students, substantive professional development in literacy, time set aside specifically for literacy instruction, use of student data to improve instruction, strong school-family partnerships, and a shared vision and mutual respect among school staff (Lab at Brown, The Knowledge Loom: http://knowledgeloom.org/elne/index.shtml).

Other reading-related programs are similarly under way at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning Laboratory (PREL), and the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning Laboratory (McREL). Access to information on these and other ongoing reading initiatives being conducted by the Labs and Centers, respectively, is possible through the following sites:
http://www.ed.gov/prog_info/Labs
http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ResCtr.html

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